A rolling stone is worth two in the bush

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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Despite opening at pole position in US theatres, RoboCop mark 1 wasn't the runaway, blockbuster, box office triumph people seem to remember it as, achieving modest takings of $53.4 million from a stake of $13 million. Rather it was a *sleeper* hit that's far more highly revered in *retrospect*. A cerebral, multi-layered social satire that deserves more attention and a deeper analysis than its action-cyberpunk surface aesthetic would initially suggest.

Ocean's former software development director, Gary Bracey, spotted its potential for video game translation long before the final cut was unveiled to the public for assessment in July 1987. In hindsight, it was a gamble that turned out to be one of the most masterful and lucrative decisions of his career. He secured the license for a meagre $20,000 during a serendipitous transitional period during which the movie

studios failed to recognise the marketing potential of pixelated accompaniments to their output.

Ocean's multi-format conversion sold upwards of a million copies, remaining in the Gallup software charts for over a year! RoboCop went down in history as one of the most successful movie-to-game adaptations of all time, in no small part due to it actually being a fun game to play on certain platforms. Not something you could readily take for granted in this cynical, throwaway field where speed is of the essence, and quality not so much.

Its celluloid inspiration raked in a further $24 million when re-released for the VHS market in the States, almost guaranteeing that funding would be made available for a sequel. Three years later RoboCop II stomped mechanically into cinemas around the globe, albeit the work of a fresh writer, producer, cinematographer, editor and director. Luckily the core cast (those who *weren't* killed off on-screen), Peter Weller, Nancy Allen and Daniel O'Herlihy, made a welcome return to reprise their roles in what otherwise may have devolved into an unrecognisable spin-off. Costing nearly three times more than the original film to produce, the follow-up reaped only $45.7 million at the box office. For a number of reasons it could easily have been tag-lined, "he's back, and this time he's blue".
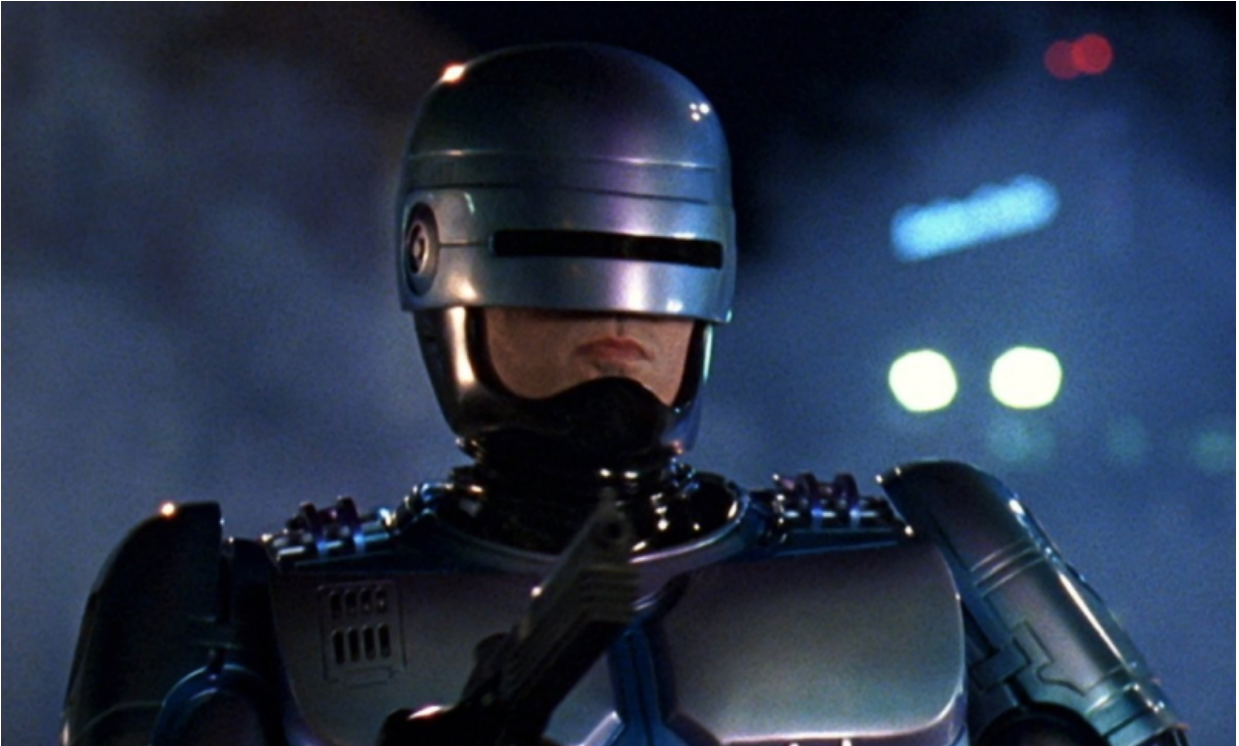
 Still set in a dystopian future Detroit city metropolis, we're reunited with an overstretched police department under the threat of an unscrupulous takeover by capitalist reprobates, OCP.

> The Old Man: And so, people of the press, city officials, in a few minutes, Omni Consumer Products and the troubled city of Detroit will join in a bold new venture. Now, I'd like to explain just what this will mean: Sometimes, we just have to start over from scratch to make things right, and that's exactly what we're going to do. We're going to build a brand new city where Detroit now stands, an example to the world.

Amidst OCP's meddling and sabotage, provoking force-wide strikes, Murphy and partner, Anne Lewis, continue to patrol the streets of Delta City. Reports of illegal drug trafficking lead them to raid a 'Nuke' plant where we're introduced to the story's pivotal plot device - a designer drug that has

swathes of the populace zombified under its deadly intoxication.

OCP eternally on the look-out to explore new ways to reduce the staff payroll are currently working on the successor to Alex Murphy's cybersuit, one they're tentatively calling RoboCop II (presumably because an imaginative marketing team would break the bank). Heading the programme is ruthless psychologist, Dr Juliette Faxx, who intends to adopt the brain of an underworld criminal scumbag with a penchant for megalomania and immortality to steer her new baby. What could possibly go wrong?

Tracked down to his brewery lair, Nuke's chief distributor and spokesvillain, Cain, is battered within an inch of his life following a RoboBike versus bomb disposal truck showdown, making him the 'perfect' candidate for Dr Faxx's half-baked experiment. Once operational he'll run on CainOS, modelled around the classic Mac OS. On the contrary, RoboCop's control system was based on DOS. Well that's a novel way for us nerds to settle an old playground row.

With Cain off the scene, his unlikely hench-child - 12-year-old Hob - steps up to the plate to coordinate his drugs empire. Wasting no time he attempts to ply Detroit's mayor with cash and gold in return for turning a blind eye to his underground, illicit operations. OCP responds by sending in the cavalry - in the guise of RoboCain - to assassinate Hob. Forging ahead with his plan to rid the city of Nuke, OCP chairman, the 'Old Man', presents his secret weapon to an audience desperate for salvation from the recent crime wave he engineered.

The Old Man: About a year ago, we gave this city RoboCop. I think he's worked out pretty well, but things have become a little rougher out there. And now, we need a law enforcement unit capable of meeting the enemy on his own ground, and carrying enough firepower... to get the job done.

The Old Man: (a prototype model of RoboCop 2 rises from the model of the proposed new city) Ladies and gentlemen, with great pleasure, I give you RoboCop 2.
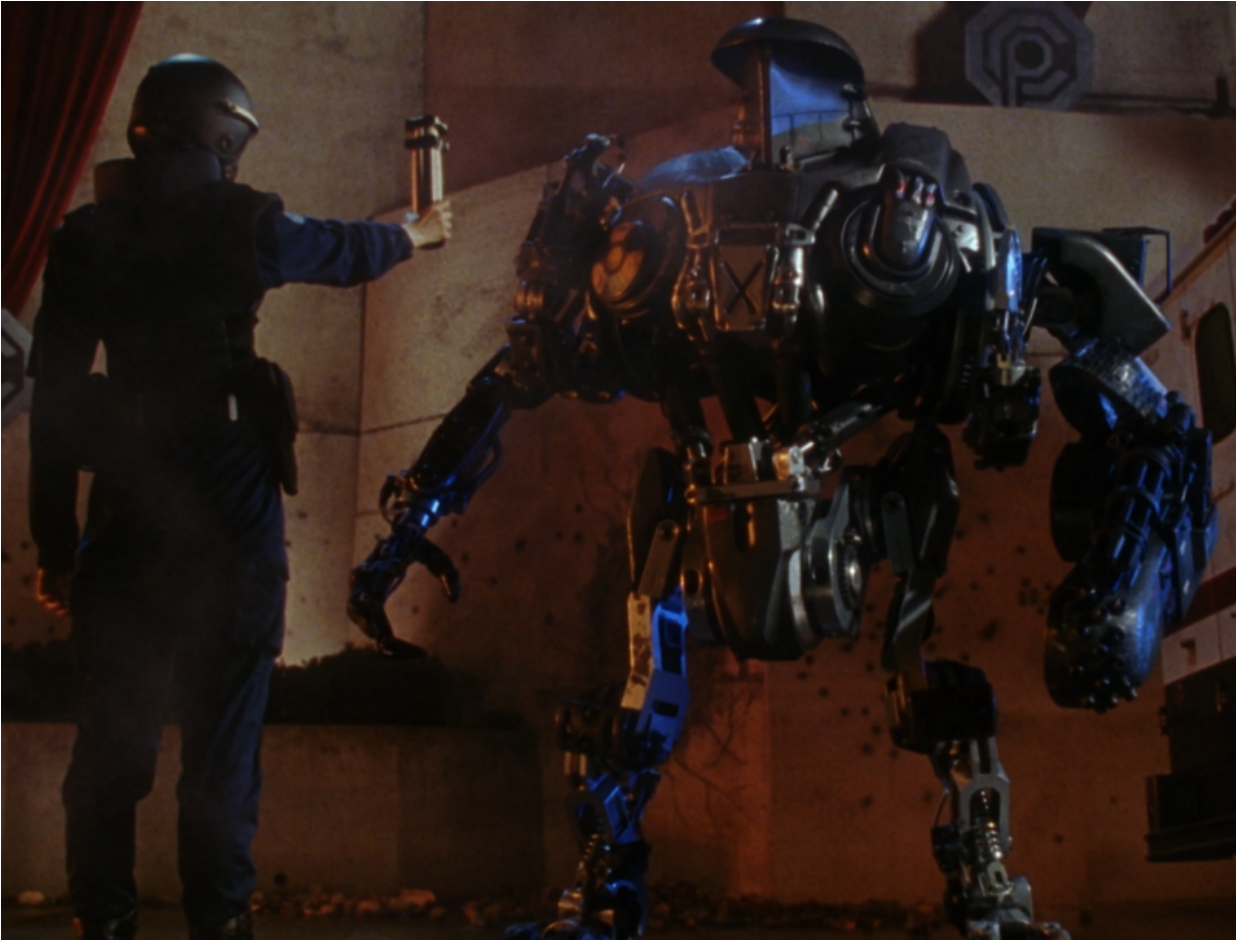
Cain - now utterly hooked - spies a vial prop brimming with delicious Nuke and loses the plot. He callously attacks whoever is in the vicinity, provoking RoboCop and Lewis to spring into defence mode, backed by the entire Detroit police force who abandon their strike in an effort to restore the peace. An epic battle ensues - one that can only be curtailed by distracting Cain with the vial he craves with all the manic, unbridled lust of a deranged lunatic crammed into the carcass of a cyborg and made to dance like a performing chimp. Come to think of it he wasn't that well balanced *before* his histrionic transformation. Messianic leaders of terrorist cults rarely are.
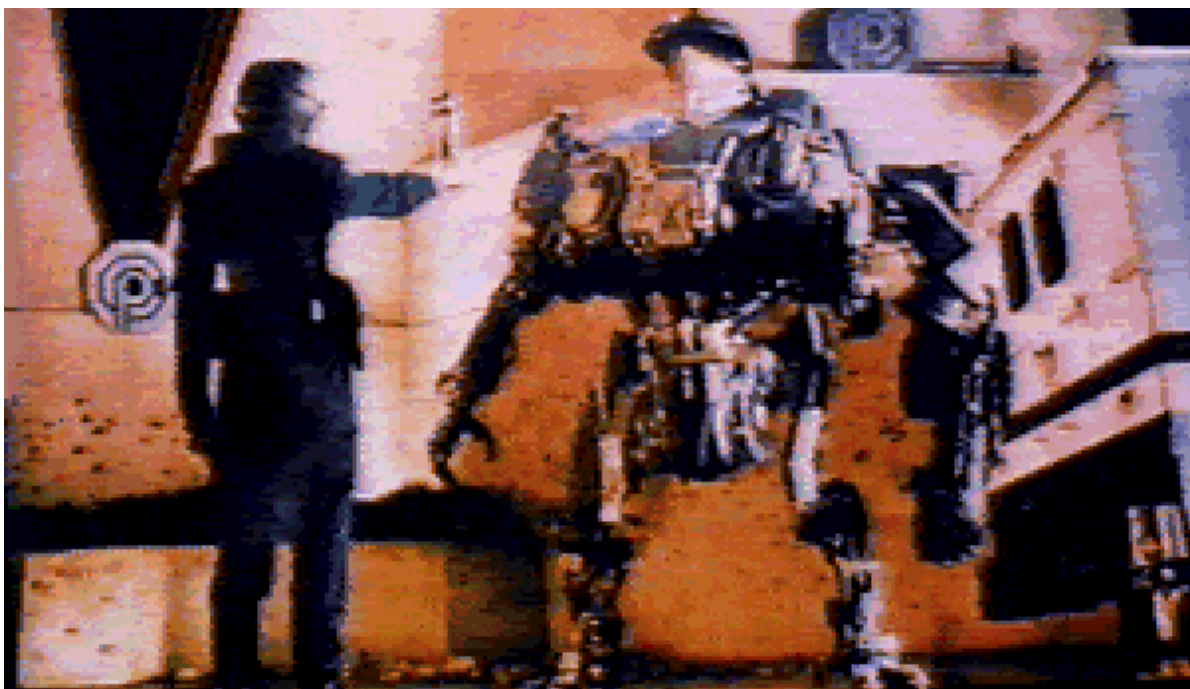
Cain, finally at rest, injects himself with Nuke, thus dropping his guard as his junkie-pain dissipates into pure ecstasy. Outwitting Cain's brute-force upper-hand, RoboCop pounces while his back's turned. Penetrating his armour, he rips out Cain's grey matter and obliterates it, thwarting his drug-addled tyranny.

Ocean's small screen iteration loosely and selectively follows the movie's plot, the bits that involve punching, or shooting baddies with a menagerie of heavy-duty artillery including your signature Berretta 93R pistol. There's no industrial strike simulation involved. We'll leave that to the likes of Maxis.

Although RoboCop's plight is briefly summarised in the manual, you would really have had to be familiar with the movie to understand the context of the scenario. Something that shouldn't really have been the case given it's a no holds barred, gratuitous, 18-rated gore-fest. One that genuinely shocked me when I first watched it before the little number in a red circle said I was allowed to.

"Foreboding, futuristic skyscrapers soar into the polluted, grey sky. Decay and decline - this is the decadent city of Detroit in the near future. A city that is slowly crumbling into ruin. With the police on strike, the helpless citizens and the legions of the homeless are easy prey for gangs of heavily armed hoodlums, none more ruthless than the evil Cain and his gang of psychopathic killers. One force stands in anarchy's path. One force that can prevent the innocent residents falling into an abyss of lawlessness and chaos - Robocop."

Special FX - comprising coder, Ian Moran, graphicians, Colin Rushby and Karen Davies, and musician, Keith Tinman - completed RoboCop II from a dockside office in Liverpool, just in time for Santa's annual drop-off spree on Christmas Eve in 1990, two months on from the movie's UK release.


It's an eight-ish level platformer similar to the first game, only with prettier graphics, more digitised sound samples and some very nicely polished stills from the movie. Well, they looked striking on a 14" CRT TV nearly three decades

ago, thanks to their incidental, blurry anti-aliasing, which was considered normal.


People struggle to pin down exactly how many levels comprise the game because some are split in two, while the two bonus stages are repeated. Three distinct platforming segments plus two bonus stages is my verdict, though feel free to argue amongst yourselves.

Your goal is to track down and destroy the Nuke supply to curb its flow to the exploited, vulnerable Detroit citizens, and then squish its primary peddler, Cain.
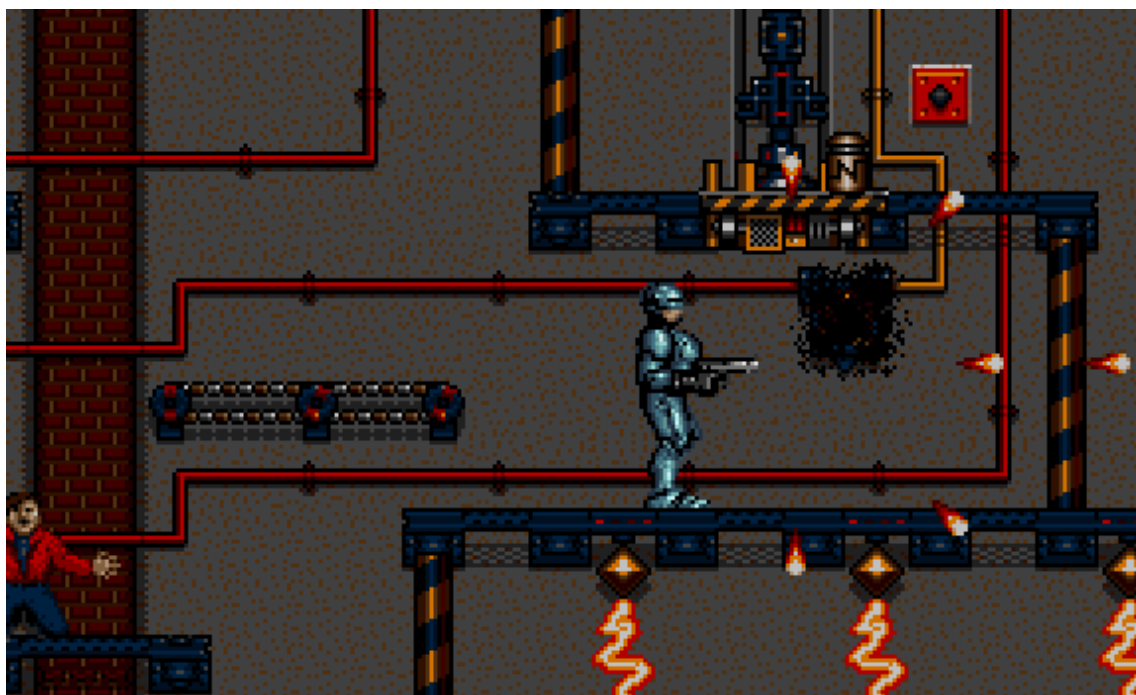
Level 1 begins in the River Rouge Complex in which you must collect ten nuke capsules by blasting open fuse box style storage compartments mounted on the walls. With the drugs confiscated the lab can be decimated to halt any further manufacturing.
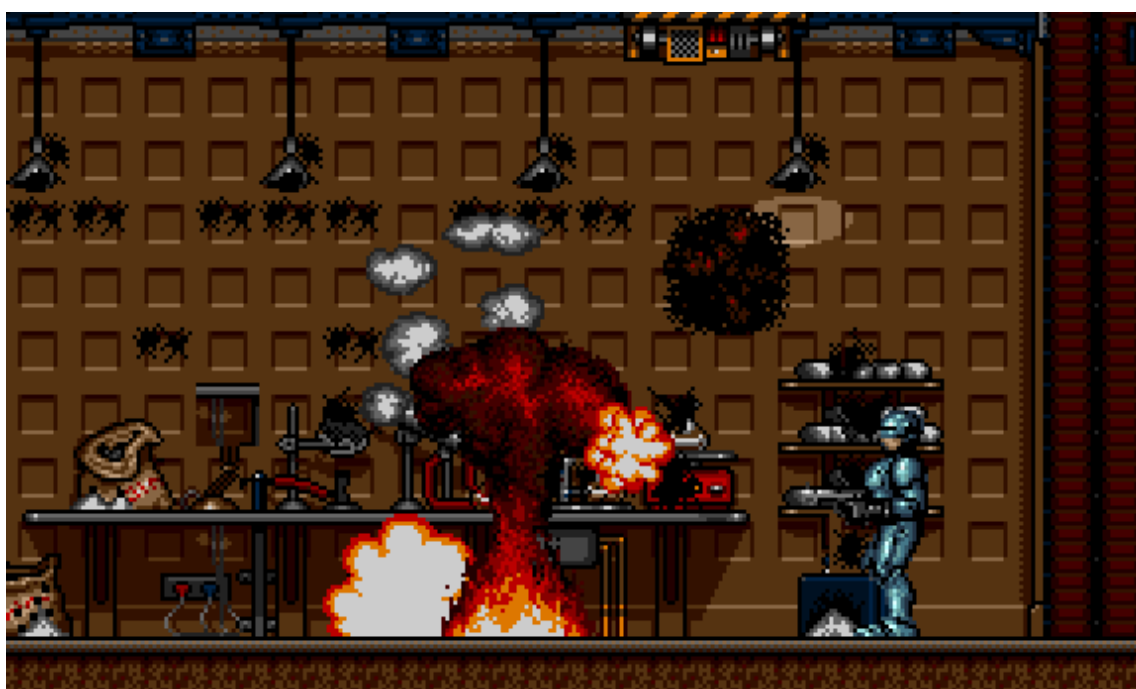
Liberate 10 hostages (simply by walking into them) and you're rewarded with an extra life. These are represented by two Robo-helmets located in the HUD. Lose a life and the visor of the right-hand helmet disappears, leaving Murphy's cadaverous face on display. Lose another life and the visor belonging to the left-hand helmet vanishes too. Lose a third life and you're a goner.


It wouldn't be that difficult a task if it weren't for the perpetually respawning goons that force you to keep shuffling along until you reach the end of the stage without a second to spare to catch your breath. It's absolutely brutal! Should you be cut down prior to this, you're sent all the way back to the beginning of the level to retrace your steps as there are no restart points.

Hostages also respawn should you leave and re-visit a scene so it's possible to cheat your way to a stash of free extra lives. Whether this is a bug or not, it's a useful survival technique; one you'd be advised to exploit given how tricky it is to dodge stray bullets, and keep your energy topped up.
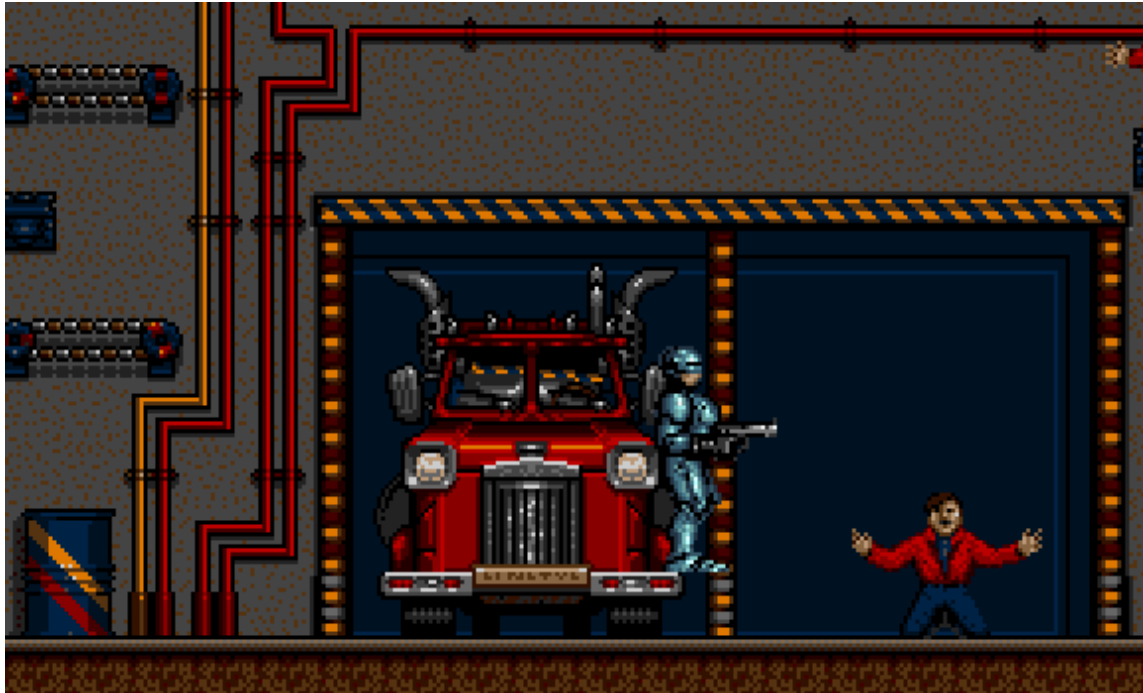
This is measured via a depiction of a Coke can that gradually becomes crumpled as you absorb hits. Uncrushing it is achieved by collecting Coke cans from the environment, for no discernible reason. Slurping red and white soft drinks in no way relates to anything that occurs in the movie so who knows what that's about. Free product placement equals complimentary Coke? Maybe the developers weren't so keen on Farley's Rusks, despite them advising Zero magazine for their preview article that baby food would be RoboCop's default means of energy replenishment, as in the first game.

A variety of weapons and enhancements including three and five-way scatterguns, rapid-fire bullet-volleys, and homing missiles can be foraged in the same way. Only the markings on the cans vary to differentiate them.
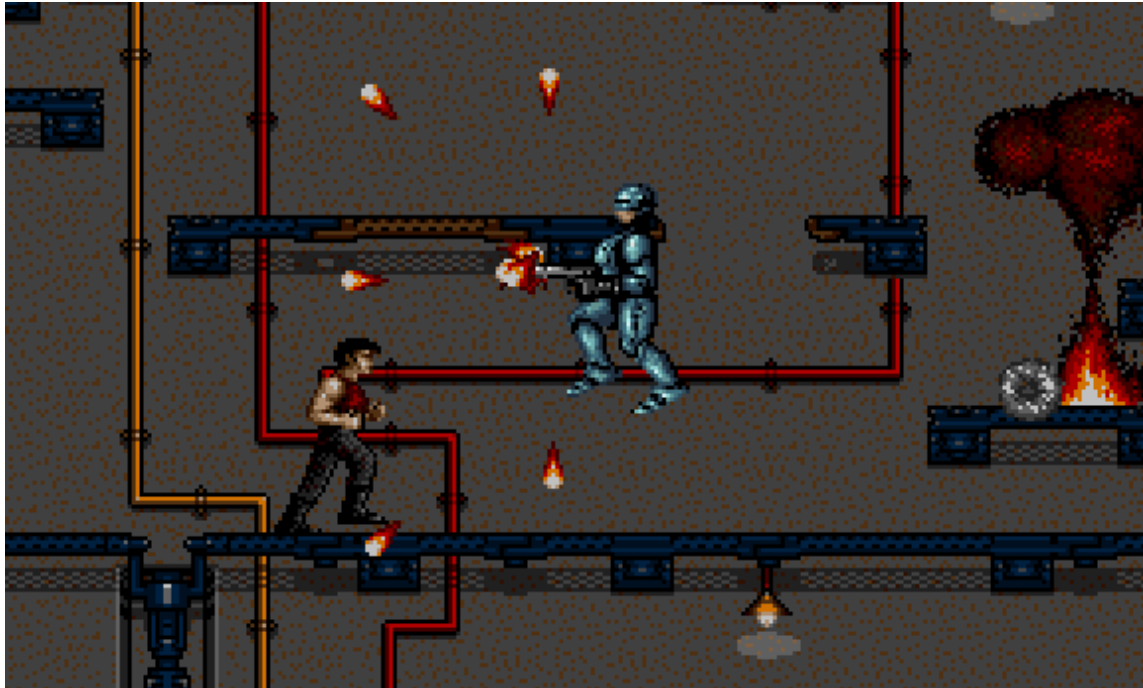
Even power-*downs* take the form of the evil drug, *Coke* I mean. During the ascending hover lift section they rain from the sky knocking you off balance. Whenever that happens you're relegated back to square one at the base of the death trap to attempt the climb once more. Other pitfall punishments reverse your joystick controls or reduce the time limit so are also best evaded.

Between each level a digitised still from the film rendered using the Amiga's HAM graphics mode bookends the action. These are followed by a swift change of pace and genre as we're led into one of the game's non-essential bonus rounds.
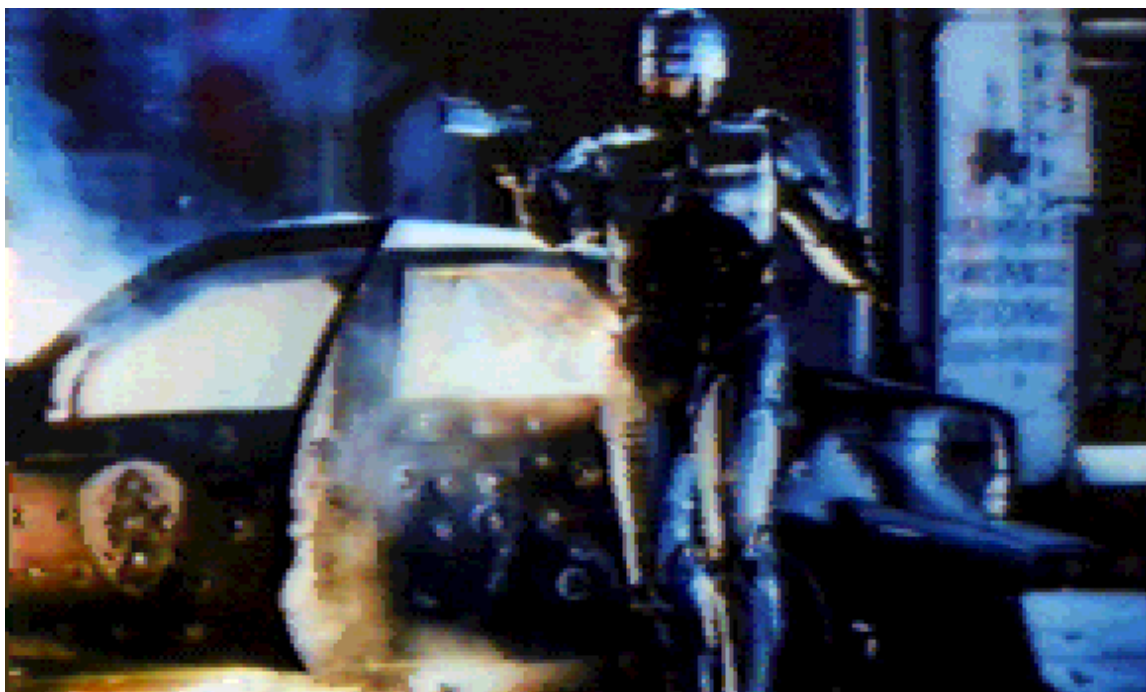
The first - known as 'brainstorm' - entails tracing a path through your neural circuitry to neuter any red chips without 'crossing the streams', so to speak. It's a bit like Snake in that sense I suppose. Our aim is to realign the structure of the boards so as to restore Murphy's flakey memories of his own identity and that of his poor widow, Ellen. If we can rebuild four circuit boards in the allotted time a picture of our former self or Mrs Murphy is formed and we earn a 'game credit' for our trouble.
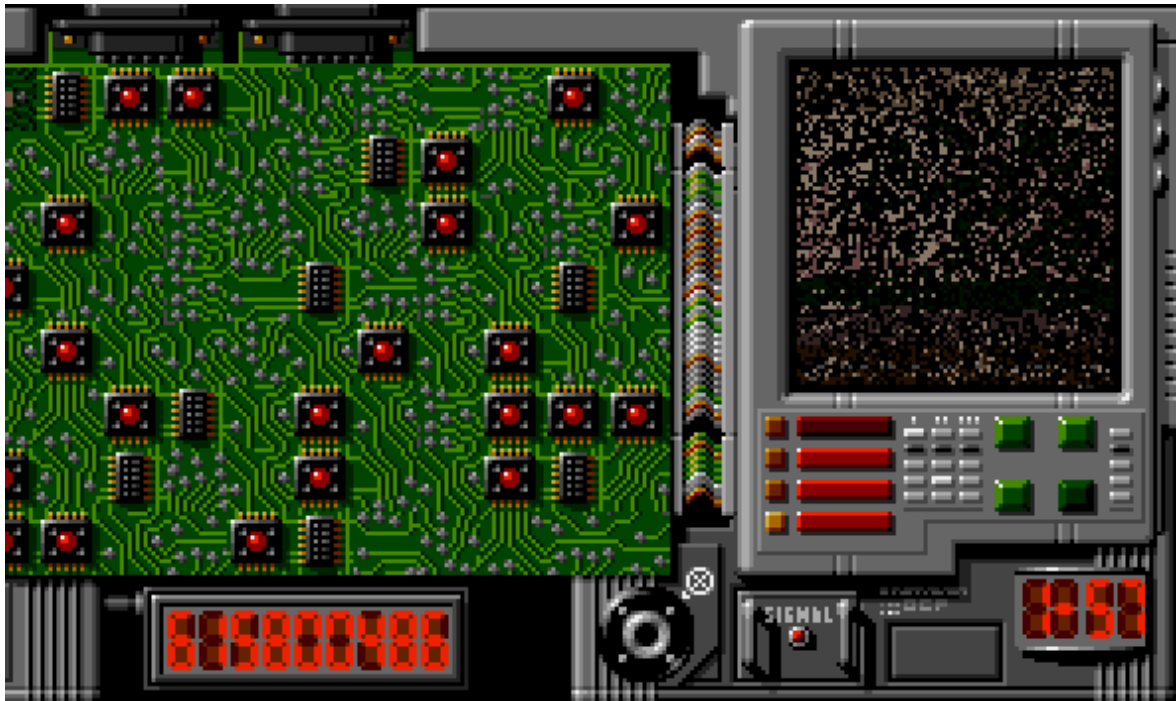
Ellen Murphy: Alex? Don't you know me? Don't you remember me? Alex, it doesn't matter what they've done to you. I...

RoboCop: (leans forward) Touch me.

Ellen Murphy: (touches his lip) It's cold.

RoboCop: (referring to his face) They made this to honour him.

Ellen Murphy: No, I...

RoboCop: Your husband is dead. I don't know you.

RoboCop's next brush with platforming hijinks takes place at the Tokugawa brewery where Cain is believed to be holed up. Here the objective is to arrest him rather than paint the walls with his brains. That's a major blunder as we'll soon discover.

When previewed it was indicated that the beer vats found on this level would need to be drained from one to another in order to safely recover submerged evidence. However, in the final cut, this mechanic was dropped. Instead, we're only required to negotiate the bubbling broth by clinging to the cranes' grappling hooks as they transport us across to solid ground. On the contrary, as planned, we're vulnerable to intoxication from dripping booze leaked from broken pipes located beneath the vats, as was also discussed during the countdown to the game's ETA.
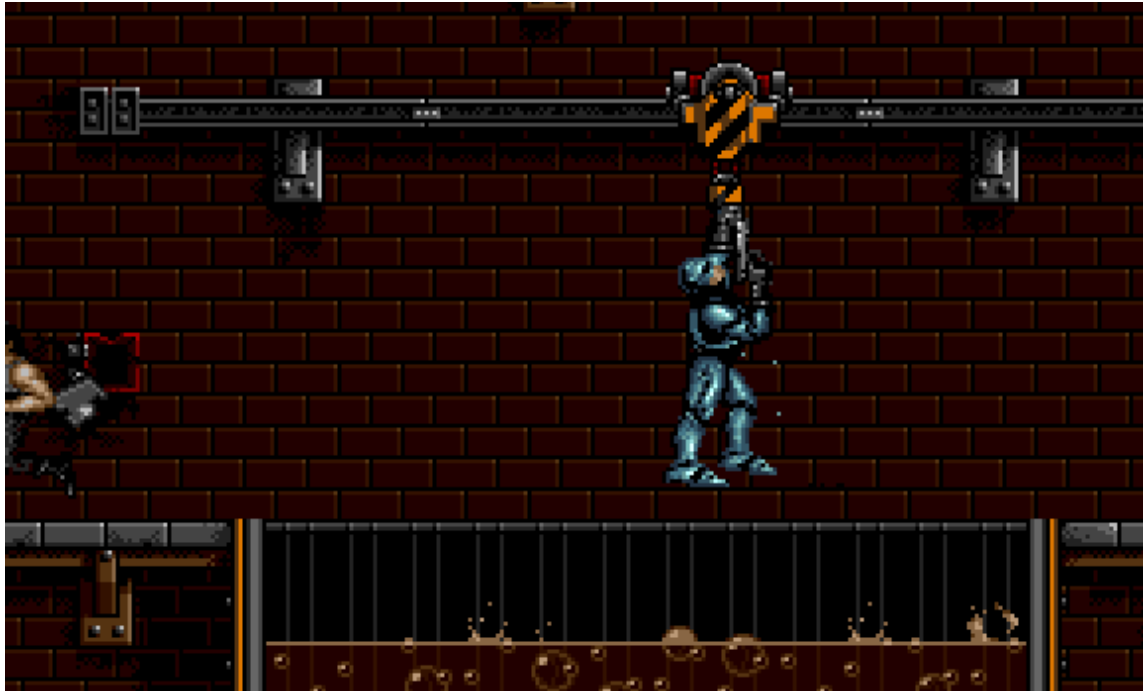
Within the same area, Hob was to make an appearance as a secondary perp to be *arrested* along with Cain, what with killing a child being a breach of one of RoboCop's core directives. This element too failed to materialise because... because... it didn't happen.

Instead, a stunted drug-runner sidekick waving a 9mm M21 submachine gun (who I assume is Hob) can be mowed down without batting an eyelid, much like any of the standard, *adult* enemies. Numerous times I should add - maybe Hob multiplies when he gets wet. You could say the same about ED-209 since he appears to have sprouted a legion of doppelgangers too.
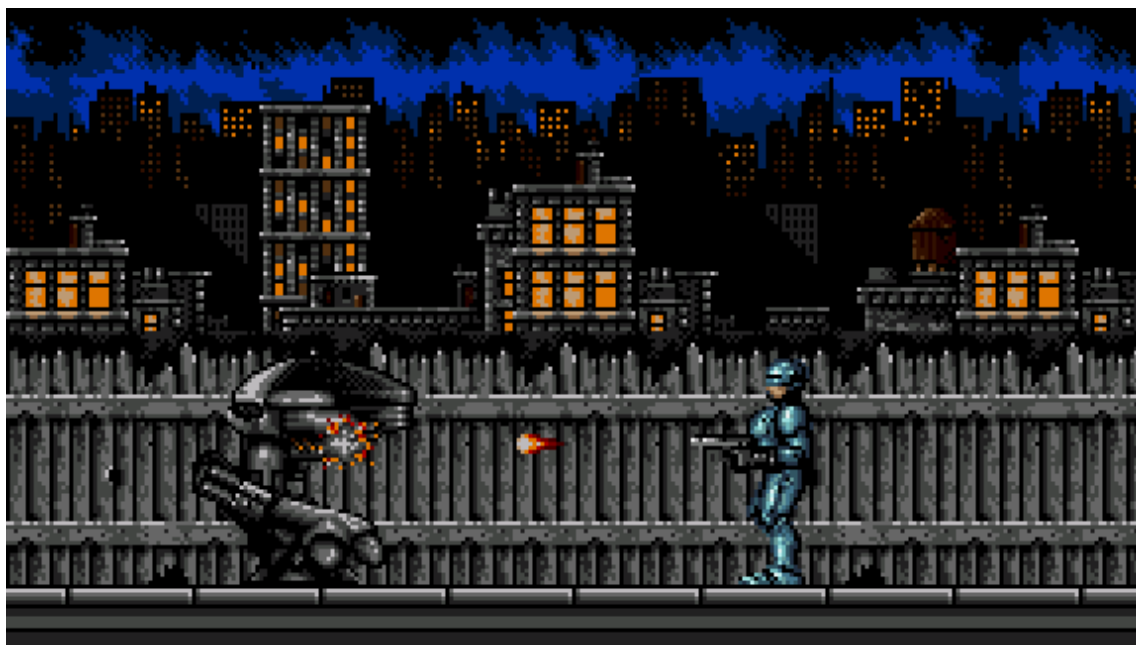
Our quirky, floaty diagonal-only jumps will stand us in good stead here if we can master the pixel-perfect precision demanded. Weak, crumbly floors give way as you traverse them causing you to fall to your doom, whilst magnetised conveyor belts drag you into the path of lethal crushers. Shooting switches to deactivate the latter before you get close enough to feel the squeeze is advisable, whereas the thermograph power-up will help to identify and skirt around dilapidated flooring.

Some platforms will be a jump too far, which is where the lifts come into play. Early on these are activated simply by standing upon them and pushing up, though it was intended for this mechanism to be made more abstruse by a devious puzzle element for the final stage, whereby lifts would be set in motion by plugging RoboCop's fist-spike into nearby computer terminals. This concept was in fact discarded in favour of blowing them up in return for yet another can of Coke. It was probably for the best - how can you be expected to solve intricate brain-teasers while being bombarded with rockets?
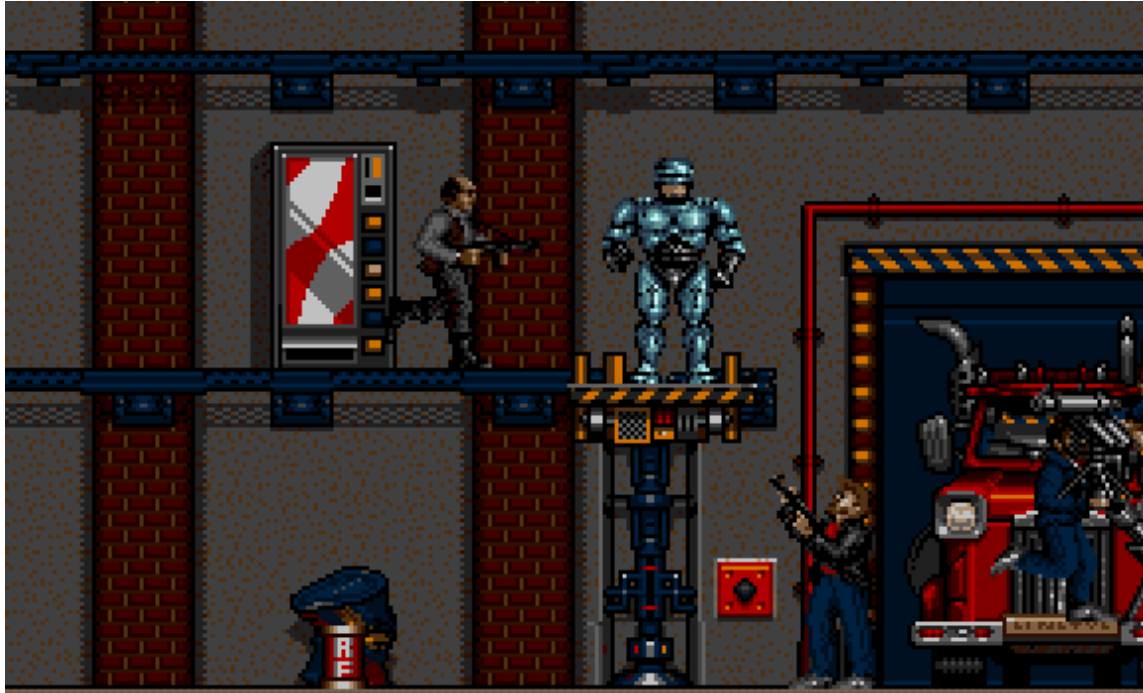
Bonus round two constitutes a shooting gallery populated with cardboard cutout baddies and civilian hostages. Hopefully, you can work out for yourself which to shoot. Unlike the puzzle mini-game, this one has a direct bearing on the main challenge in that your targeting accuracy determines the number of shots required to kill your adversaries in the next level. Perform poorly and you'll find your mission gets much tougher as you progress, which oddly is antithetic to the way adaptive difficulty normally functions.
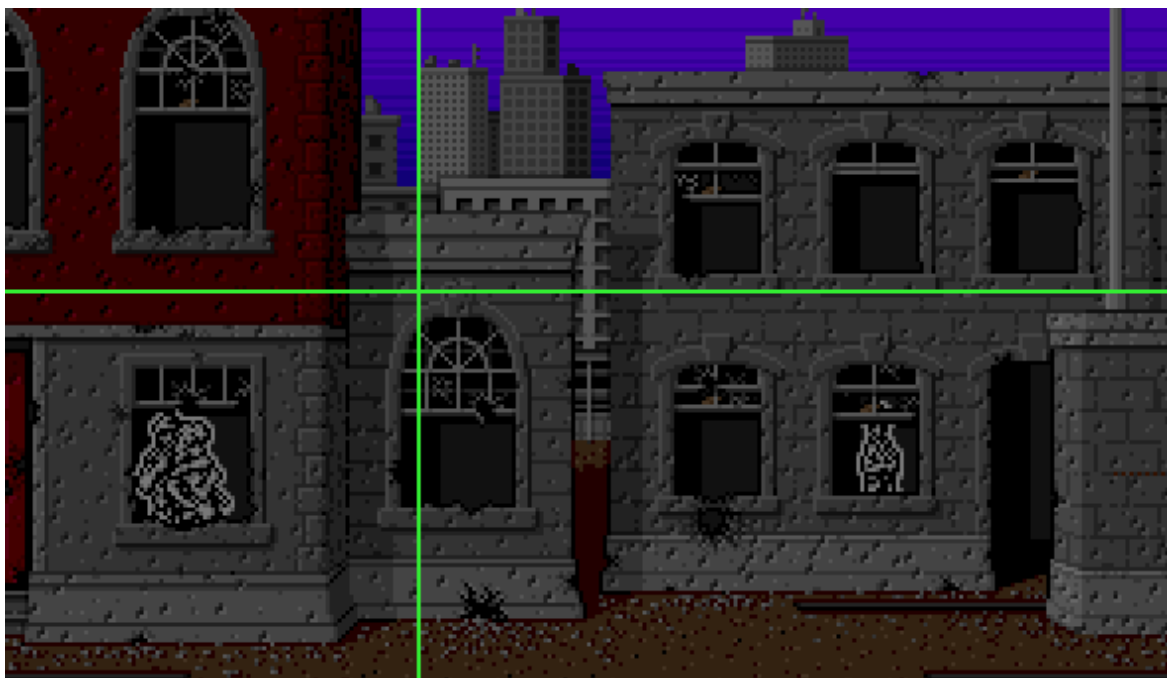
Our final confrontation with Cain takes place in the Civic Centrum skyscraper (a new symbol of hope!), mirroring the movie's denouement. "This magnificent structure will be the seat of leadership for the new Detroit." Here we must exploit our accumulated ammo and upgraded weaponry to rampage towards the roof to give him a piece of our mind.

Now we really begin to feel the pinch as our three life pittance ebbs away, becoming more aware than ever of the tight time limit dictating the tempo. Luckily this hindrance can be eased by blasting fuse boxes to reveal extra time capsules. Punching holes through the walled scenery to reach distant parts of a level is a similarly effective way to maximise the paltry time allowance as you dodge bazookas, armour-piercing rockets, grenades, and incendiary shells.
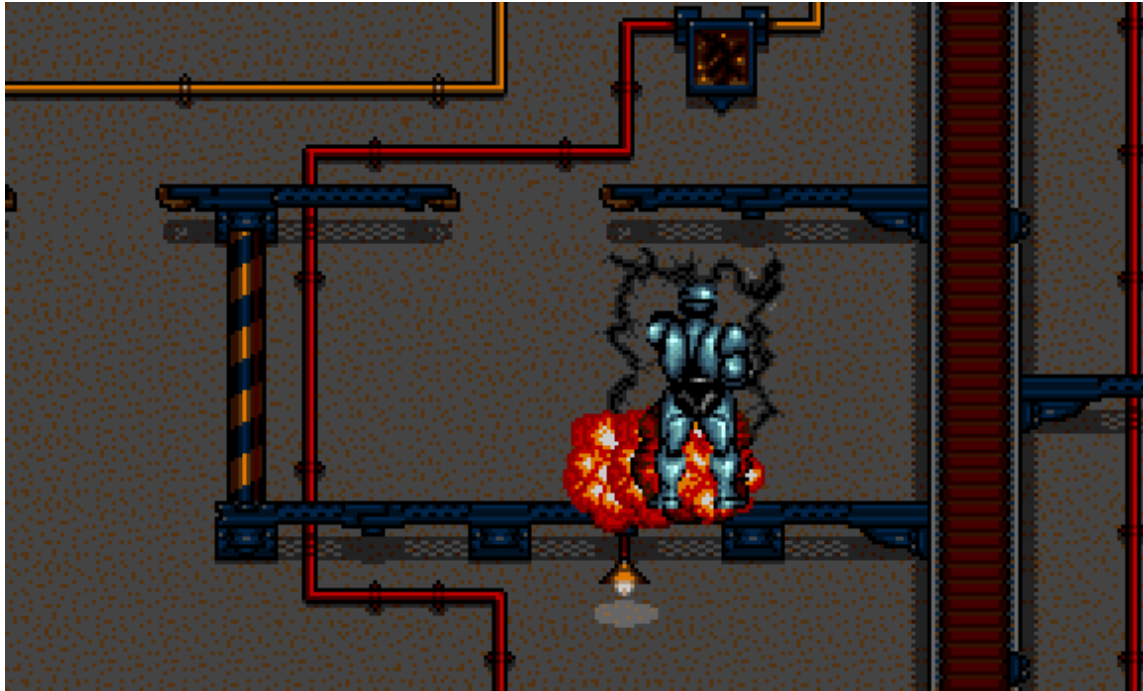
Clashing with RoboCop's higher calibre nemesis we must edge him towards sheer drops, and fractured spots in the floor until it buckles under his hulking heft. As he crashes

through to the level below, still pelting us with heat-seeking missiles, we continue steering him ever closer to the great scrapyard in the sky in a skirmish reminiscent of a scene from one of Family Guy's 'Ernie the Giant Chicken' brawling slugfests. With Cain cornered, flummoxed by a dead-end in the building's basement car park, retreat is no longer an option. Metal Mickey's days are undoubtedly numbered; you'll need a calculator that understands decimals here seeing as in a matter of mere seconds we 'shutdown' his operating system with a barrage of bullets, rather than a spot of DIY brain surgery as in the movie's finale.

In terms of graphics, RoboCop II for the Amiga is a major improvement over its comparatively primitive predecessor. Comprising 32 colours (16 allotted to sprites, and a further 16 for the backgrounds), the visuals are richer and infinitely more inviting, convincingly brought to life courtesy of its superior frame count animation. Rather than a direct port from the Atari ST, the sequel - having been created from the ground up by an independent team of developers - clearly has its own identity. One that far more closely resembles its arcade counterpart than Ocean's first attempt, notwithstanding the absence of a two-player mode.

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As disappointing as it is not to hear the iconic RoboCop theme tune blaring over the title graphic, RoboCop II's dramatically punchy substitute is exceptionally well executed. Music elsewhere is sparsely implemented, though the meaty sound effects and digitised voice samples go some way towards ameliorating this drawback. "Your move creep!" and similar quotables occupy a whopping 200k worth of disk space alone. These samples along with all the other in-game audio were composed with a Roland D-10 'digital linear arithmetic synthesizer' (a keyboard), and a pro sound sampler. Take my word for it, that was impressive technology back in 1990.

RoboCop II isn't without its flaws sadly, some of which are sufficiently significant so as to counter any advances made. Firstly the protagonist's animation is more camp than intimidating - he walks with an odd rigidity that makes you wonder if he's got a niggly, sharp stone lodged in each of his metal shoes. On a similar note, his jump is surely a smidgen too athletic? Should he be jumping at all? He never does in the movie for obvious reasons - he must weigh a zillion tonnes lugging that lumbering tin can around everywhere he goes! That scene at the end where he lands on RoboCain's back doesn't count as it's more of a plunge from above than a leap under his own steam, so my point stands.

If aiming hadn't been hamstrung by RoboCop's confusion over whether to jump or point his gun skywards it might not have been so inconsistent and unwieldy. More lifts may have been the answer, although RoboCop's inability to shoot whilst riding them would have to be reconsidered, along with his refusal to shoot downwards. That would interfere with his crouch you see.

It's a ridiculously unforgiving game plagued by incessantly respawning enemies, mitigated with too few restart points. And what's more, Mr Murphy is too vulnerable for his own good - should he really lose energy just because he has brushed against a baddie? Have they suddenly become radioactive?

If this were the bottom line assessment bit I'd say RoboCop II is a competent, albeit formulaic platformer that's too mean-spirited to be truly fun to play. Whilst receiving some exceptional scores (48% - 92%), unlike the original it was no runaway sales juggernaut. That said, it *did* enjoy a brief stint at no. 1 in the Gallup charts in March 1991, while the budget re-release reached the no. 10 spot in March 1993.
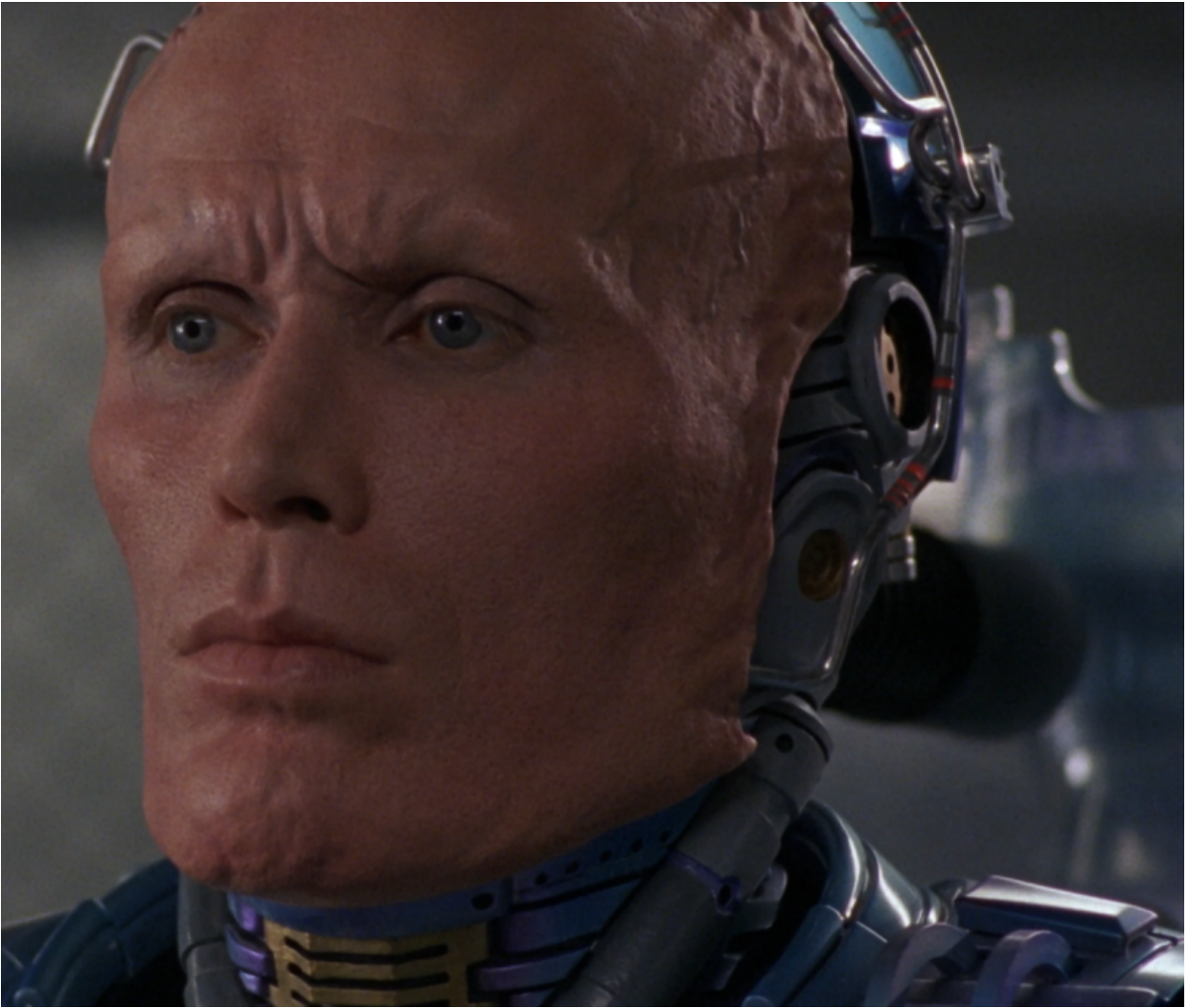
Ocean's source material was quite rightly considered somewhat of a misstep courtesy of Irvin Kershner's failure to reproduce its forbear's biting satire and psychological depth. Surrogating these subtleties for slapstick and (glorious old school) stop-motion mech-bashing, RoboCop II descended into cliched action-thriller territory. Ironically this made it perfect fodder for unrelenting, twitch-fuelled video game conversion. By cutting to the chase Orion Pictures made the developer's job that much easier, resulting in a linear, off-the-shelf *stroll* and gun that surprised no-one whilst offering an instant fix for hard-as-nails gun-slinging sharp-shooters. For anyone preferring something slightly more off the beaten track there's RoboCop III, considered a high water mark for

Ocean, if not for Nancy Allen who ill-advisedly stuck with the franchise to the bitter end.